

PRESS RELEASE

Congressman John Conyers, Jr.

Fourteenth District, Michigan
Ranking Member, Committee on the Judiciary
Dean, Congressional Black Caucus

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
January 8, 2003

CONTACT:
Dena Graziano (202) 226-6888

Conyers Re-Introduces Legislation Restoring Voting Rights to Citizens Released from Incarceration

Today, Congressman John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee re-introduced the "Civic Participation and Rehabilitation Act of 2003," along with 22 Cosponsors, granting persons who have been released from incarceration the right to vote in Federal elections. Conyers issued the following statement regarding the legislation:

"At a time when our Nation faces record low voter participation, this legislation represents an historic means of both expanding voting rights while helping to reintegrate former felons into our democratic society. The practice of many states denying voting rights to former felons represents a vestige from a time when suffrage was denied to whole classes of our population based on race, gender, religion, national origin and property. Over the past two centuries, these restrictions, along with post-Civil War exclusions such as the poll tax and literacy requirements, have been eliminated. It is long past time that these restrictions be relegated to unenlightened history.

Unfortunately, the United States continues to stand alone among the major industrialized nations in permitting an entire category of citizens, former felons, to be cut off from the democratic process. It is time that the United States restore these fundamental rights and join the community of nations in this regard. Denial of suffrage to these individuals is no small matter. A recent study by the Sentencing Project reveals that some 3.9 million Americans, or one in 50 adults have currently or permanently lost their voting rights as a result of a felony conviction. This includes an estimated 1.4 million African American men, or 13 percent of the total population of black adult men, a rate seven times the national average.

In addition to diminishing the legitimacy of our democratic process, denying voting rights to ex-offenders is inconsistent with the goal of rehabilitation. Instead of reintegrating such individuals into society, felony voting restrictions only serve to reaffirm their feelings of alienation and isolation. The purpose of correctional facilities throughout our history have been to make an offender fit to re-enter society. We should honor this conviction that once a felon has served his/her time, then he/she is ready to be a functioning member of society. Voting then must be allowed, as the most basic constitutive act of citizenship.

It is even more important for this legislation to pass when we look back at the 2000 election in Florida. In that election 400,000 ex-felons were denied their right to vote. In an election where it came down to 537 voters, this is a decisive number. Instead of contracting the voting pool we should be expanding it so that our elected officials can more accurately resemble the wishes of the people.

This legislation constitutes a narrowly crafted effort to expand voting rights for ex-felons, while protecting state prerogatives to generally establish voting qualifications. The legislation would only apply to persons who have been released from prison, and it would only apply to federal elections. As such, our bill is fully consistent with constitutional requirements established by the Supreme Court in a series of decisions upholding federal voting rights laws.

Our nation has slowly seen the enfranchisement of all of its citizens. Though it has been a slow process we have always moved forward, giving more and more citizens the right to vote. This bill is merely the next step in the expansion of the electorate. And it is a step we must take."